World Chronicle

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WORLD WEATHER

Throughout the ages, human beings have adapted to weather and climate by arranging shelter, food production, energy provision and lifestyles in harmony with climate and environmental conditions. However, the recent prediction of significant changes in climate over the next 100 years, combined with some of the major natural disasters experienced in recent years, have focused new attention on the consequences of climate and weather on the environment and on socio-economic development. On this episode of **World Chronicle**, Professor Godwin Obasi, Secretary-General of the World Meteorological Organization, discusses recent trends in forecasting the weather around the world.

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ANNOUNCER: From United Nations Headquarters in New York, this is **World Chronicle**, an unedited interview programme about major global issues.

Here now to introduce our guest is the host of today's **World Chronicle**.

LITTLEJOHNS: I'm Michael Littlejohns, and this is **World Chronicle**.

The World Meteorological Organization, WMO, has been a specialized United Nations agency since 1950. Today, it is involved in activities ranging from weather prediction to air pollution research, climate change, ozone layer depletion studies and tropical storm forecasting. WMO coordinates global scientific activity to allow increasingly prompt and accurate weather information and other services for public, private and commercial use, including the international airline and shipping industries. WMO's activities contribute to the safety of life and property, the socio-economic development of nations and the protection of the environment.

Our guest today is an expert on weather issues. He is Professor Godwin Obasi, Secretary-General of the World Meteorological Organization. Joining me to talk with Mr. Obasi are Evgueni Menkes of *RIA "Novosti"* and Walter Ptaeffle of *Kuwait News Agency, KUNA*.

Mr. Obasi, welcome to **World Chronicle.**

Professor Obasi, as you probably know, the weather is a bit of an obsession in the United States – people talking about it all the time. I think somebody mentioned they talk about it, but you can't do very much about it. I'm going to put a question to you which I am sure you're going to reject and that is on the subject of forecasting. It seems to me that forecasting is really not all that good. I've had personal experiences of cancelling plans because of weather forecasts which have told me that it's going to pour with rain or snow, or whatever and the weather turns out to be beautiful and even respected institutions like the Weather Channel, which is a 24-hour service here in the United States on television, seem to get it wrong always as often as they get it right. Admittedly, this is anecdotal and I don't have any statistics to prove it, but I'm pretty sick sometimes about the way they screw it up. So what's your response?

OBASI: Well, I think you have been a bit unfortunate to have picked a day where possibly the forecast was not as accurate as desirable. There have been tremendous progress made in weather forecasting in the past one or two decades. I will want to assure you that the weather forecast, the skill shown in that forecast in three days about one or two

decades ago, is the same skill now shown in five to ten days' forecast. So there have been tremendous progress made in weather forecasting . Even on seasonal projection, I will tell you that there have been a breakthrough in 1994 when it is not possible using the progress in science and technology to even predict – make progressing seasonal forecast like the last El Niño, 97-98 El Niño that was predicted even six months ahead of time. And I think a lot of progress is being made. Generally speaking, even day to day forecast, even in tropical regions where prediction is even much more difficult, I want to assure you that really, the skill shown in prediction now must be over 85 percent in all these countries.

LITTLEJOHNS: 85 percent.

OBASSI: Over 85 percent.

LITTLEJOHNS: What about hurricanes, Professor? The recent hurricane in the United States was projected to hit Tampa, Florida. Of course it did not hit Tampa, Florida but it played havoc with North Carolina much farther up the coast. So, what about that?

OBASI: Now you must appreciate this science. Here you are, the network of observation stations are very sparse, generally speaking. Sure enough, you have complimentary observance systems through satellites which could enable one to continue to track such meteorological event like hurricanes. But to predict precisely, in a point, a point or a town on the world precisely when that system is going to get there and how near the mark intensive path of the system will impact that particular town, I think it's still very difficult.

LITTLEJOHNS: But surely it should be accurate within a hundred miles or so, isn't it?

OBASI: Yes, but the lead time of the forecast is what is in question. If the lead time is two hours, obviously from weather reader you can now say precisely where that system is going to affect. But if the lead time is two days, or three days, then of course the accuracy would be decreased.

MENKES: Dr. Obasi, please tell us a little bit more about your Organization. How much do you spend? What about your budget? Where do you get the money? Are you reforming your Organization? Because the reform has been the buzzword in the United Nations system in recent years.

OBASI: Well, the World Meteorological Organization has its origin from the International Meteorological Organization that was established in 1873. It became a

specialized agency of the United Nations in 1950. Now, it is because the world community felt that there was a need to exchange weather information amongst all countries in order to use that information to support sustainable development -- all aspects of social, economic -- then it was fair that the world has to cooperate in implementing some of these activities and a mechanism was needed in order to coordinate global efforts in this direction. Hence the role of the World Meteorological Organization. It is a specialized agency of the United Nations. It has its own separate governing body. The Secretary-General is elected by the countries concerned and the budget comes from contributions from each individual countries, dependent on what the countries believe they needed to implement within a particular financial period, and our financial period is four years.

MENKES: About those thousands of stations you have around the globe, about satellites and so on, is this paid by your Organization?

OBASI: No. The members themselves agree on what is desirable. The weather, the atmosphere, knows no political, cultural, national boundary. The globe has a common atmosphere. Whatever happens elsewhere will have impact with another country and because of this situation, in a collective way, through the coordination mechanism of the World Meteorological Organization, it is agreed where observation stations need to be developed and what information need to be acquired. The quality of those information, the frequency of those information, and which information needs to be exchanged among all members of the Organization. Hence that is the role of the World Meteorological Organization. But it is the members themselves that paid for those monitoring stations. It is the members themselves that paid for the observance systems like satellites, automatic stations, aircraft that are taking observations at take off, cruising level and landing, shifts of opportunity, ocean breeze, etc.

MENKES: Let's come back for a second to weather forecasting. Let's take a standard situation. A meteorologist at a local tv or radio station is preparing his report and we always hear that this is a very, very exclusive report only by this meteorologist. How exclusive is that report, first; and second, is your information from your Organization available for this specialist?

OBASI: Through the WMO, we have nearly all countries of the world as members of this Organization. Currently, the membership stands at 185 countries. All countries are connected through a WMO global telecommunications system to facilitate

exchange of all data, exchange of all information, which any country and their citizens could tap in full support of their socio-economic development. So any particular country like in the United States, you could have private sector, the information is made available to them through the National Meteorological Weather Service of the United States, through NOAA, for example. So this information is further processed by them ....

LITTLEJOHNS: What does those initials stand for, again?

OBASI: National Oceanographic and Atmospheric Administration.

LITTLEJOHNS: Oh, that's right, that's right.

OBASI: So that private sector will have added value, they reprocess those information, add certain information to it – they could have the whole weather radar – to improve on the information that we have received either internationally or through the National Weather Service of the United States. And they now come with their own forecast which they would put on television and disseminate it to the public.

PFAEFFLE: Do you think those television weathermen or women deserve their high salaries there?

OBASI: I don't know the salaries they are paid. So I don't know what they are paid. But we also have weathermen and women in other countries where even salaries are quite low.

PFAEFFLE: I meant to come back to this question about predicting – in this case predicting earthquakes. How much progress have you made in forecasting earthquakes?

OBASI: Firstly, there is no inter-governmental mechanism in the United Nations system that is giving the responsibility of predicting earthquakes. There is the International Seismological Centre in UK, in the United Kingdom. UNESCO, United Nations Educational Cultural Organization in Paris, has a section on scientific seismology. The World Meteorological Organization, the telecommunication is used for exchange of information if there is earthquake somewhere, etc. And there is a body – a non-governmental body – in the United Kingdom that is responsible for all coordinating activities concerning earthquakes. What is desirable in future would be to evolve an inter-governmental mechanism, to be responsible for development of the scientific underpinning for earthquakes. Universities on their own, or weather institutions, other institutions on their own, try to predict earthquake. The science is several decades behind. For example the science of meteorology, and that is an area which I believe needs to be further developed by the International Community, it

may interest you that forty countries now incorporate issues related to seismology, etc., within the National Meteorological Service but nonetheless the World Meteorological Organization has not been given that mandate at the present moment.

LITTLEJOHNS: This is **World Chronicle**. Our guest is Professor Godwin Obasi, Secretary-General of the World Meteorological Organization.

Professor Obasi, in wartime military actions, many times, good weather forecasting of course, is extremely important in the situation in Iraq a few years ago and currently, in fact, because the United States and the United Kingdom are still bombing in the no-fly-zone, what -- and of course in Kosovo -- was information from WMO available to the combatants at that time? In other words were you helping what some people might call the quote aggressors unquote?

OBASI: Well the WMO is merely promoting the use of meteorological information for peaceful purposes -- social-economic development. Of course, when there is combatant, it is quite clear that meteorological information is useful and I believe that those engaging in such activities who have, either through their own national meteorological services, the information they require for any of their own operations.

MENKES: So you would not be dealing with the issue of climate being used as weapon? We have been reading the reports about it every now and then.

OBASI: WMO has never promoted climate or weather information to be used as weapons or for any warfare. I think that would be wrong. What we are promoting is how best the world community could tap climate as a resource for social-economic advancement and how the world community should cooperate together in order to preserve the global climate for the future generation of humankind.

MENKES: Global warming has become a cliché in recent years. As the chief meteorologist of the world, what can you tell us about it? I mean in my country, Russia, Russia was almost always famous for its severe winters which seem to be milder now. But here in New York, my own meteorological observations in recent years show that the winters are more severe.

OBASI: The global warming issue has a long history. And of course the World Meteorological Organization was in the forefront even as early as the '70s. The World Meteorological Organization issued a statement to warn the world community that human activities are going to have impact on the global climate. By '79, WMO organized that

global conference to discuss this issue and the ramification of that change. By '85, it was quite clear that the green house gases will continue to be accumulated in the atmosphere. By now, even the amount of carbon dioxide has increased by over 31 percent compared to 1870. So it is known that this so called green house gases have certain properties. They call them radiative properties whereby they will promote the warming of the global atmosphere not allowing much of the heat that comes from the sun to go back to outer space. Now that was why the World Meteorological Organization and UNEP set up the Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change by 1988. And that body was entrusted with certain responsibilities, namely: the science of what the green house gases were trying to do, namely to change the climate, the possible impact and the response strategies, both mitigative and adaptive. And that body now had been working very hard also to feed into it the United Nations Formal Convention on Climate Change. I will just tell you that the origination of that Convention was due to the World Meteorological Organization and the United Nations Environmental Programme. In fact, the first two meetings/sessions of that body was convened by us. But because of the ramification of the subjects, namely: issues – economic issues, poverty issues -- were being associated with it. It was fair that World Meteorological Organization, being a purely scientific and technical organization would not have the required expertise to engage in that. That's why the whole convention went to the United Nations. So, we're doing quite a bit about the subject and I think it is a serious issue where all nations have to work collectively together in order to avoid adverse consequences of a changed global climate.

PFAEFFLE: I have lived in the same city here but I have always had the impression that the winters are getting milder and several years ago, we have piles of snow here in New York and it's very rare now that we get snow. Is there any reason for that? Do you have an explanation?

OBASI: Well, in the scientific community, one cannot say that we've left one mode of climate to another mode. I do believe that the experiences in recent decades is manifestation of what the world will experience if we now have a changed climate mode. In fact in the past few decades, every year becomes warmer than the previous year. If you take the global mean temperature together, 1997 was the warmest at that time. 1998 was the warmest on record. Of course, 1999 is probably not to be following the same series but nonetheless, it will still be among the warmest year in the last 160 years.

PFAEFFLE: Are you talking about the United States here or ....

OBASI: No, no, no, the whole globe. So when we say the globe is much warmer, sure enough in some areas it could be cooler because you're having a whole earth together where a system where if there is something – the atmosphere in one area will show its effect in another area. But nonetheless, everything is interconnected. That's why even depletion of ozone layer is also permanent. In fact last year was the worst ozone hole on record. That's why the Montreal Protocol has agreed about ten years ago to fade off the substances that deplete the ozone layer. But because of the general circulation of the earth which is a joint dynamic system, everything is connected. So what happens in climate if there is global warming also has a bit of influence in the upper atmosphere depleting even the ozone layer.

PFAEFFLE: There was a big scare years ago about the depletion of the ozone layer. You don't hear that much about it anymore. Does that concern you that perhaps the resolve of the world has sort of lessened?

OBASI: No, no, no. The world has done marvellously well on the issue of the ozone layer. There was a protocol – Montreal Protocol – and all the nations of the world have agreed to fade away the chlorofluorocarbon that are responsible for the depletion of the ozone layer. Of course, because the lifetime of these chlorine species bromine is long, maybe by the middle of next century before we start now reaping much of the benefit of the action taken about ten years ago. So it's still continuing. That's why it is not much talked about anymore because the world has done the best they can do and some of the developing countries still have industries which are still utilizing the chlorofluorocarbon, etc. Some funding mechanism has been set up to have those industries and those countries to convert to more friendly ozone substances.

LITTLEJOHNS: Professor Obasi, is there perhaps a connection between climate and development in the sense that the northern cooler countries tend to be more developed than the southern tropical countries. Is there a reason for that you think? Is it easier to work hard in a cool climate than in a warm one?

OBASI: If you tell me maybe several decades back, I would have said yes. Because if you don't have problem, you don't think of solving, in seeking a solution. Problems and challenges force human beings to seek solutions. If in the tropical areas like in Africa, my own part of the world, the climate is warm, you have fruits in the forest, bananas, pawpaws, these are there. You know – you don't need to plant that, they are there. Then

you don't think that you have a problem and so you don't develop housing heating system whereas in the extreme northern latitudes the climate is harsh in the winter months. If somebody will get frozen, so one is stimulated to start finding solutions to address the problem, to conserve food, etc. But of course in recent times, things have changed and development has not been uniform. The north has been much more developed than the south and also because of the history. And then what is now left is issue of technology transfer and if you could have an enabling environment for the countries of the south to close the gap in the development area, you know, I believe this can happen. So it's a question of situations and opportunities in the recent times.

MENKES: Professor Obasi, of the many hats you wear, you're also Chairman of the New Sun Foundation. What kind of an organization is that?

OBASI: The New Sun Foundation was established in 1994. It was a private sector type of initiative that focuses on weather, climate and water issue and WMO is associated with it because it becomes an ally of ours to promote world consciouness and to assist those nations that requires to enhance some of their own facilities so that they could also contribute to the protection of the global climate. That was the main purpose of that body.

PFAEFFLE: Speaking of sun, what can you tell those of us who like tanning? Has the sun been more dangerous in recent years because of the depletion of ozone layer?

OBASI: If one lives in a locality where there is marked depletion of the ozone layer, obviously that would be dangerous because the sun has a large spectrum of radiational belt. The extreme ones, namely: the ultra-violet radiation is similar to atomic x-rays. So if it should penetrate to the earth surface and melt with living organism either plant, human beings, etc., this could be very, very dangerous. It could create skin cancer and all other type of diseases. But in addition, where there is also less cloudiness, then the sun is likely to penetrate stronger and this could also have harmful effect. That is indeed why it is important for the world community to do whatever they can to protect the ozone layer which nature has put to envelop our planet. That's why we are able to survive on this planet.

LITTLEJOHNS: Mr. Obasi, that's all the time we have. Thank you for being with us on this edition of **World Chronicle.** Our guest has been Professor Godwin Obasi, Secretary-General of the World Meteoroiogical Organization. He was interviewed by Evgueni Menkes of *Ria "Novosti"* and Walter Pfaeffle of *Kuwait News Agency/KUNA.* I'm

Michael Littlejohns. Thank you for joining us. We invite you to be with us for the next edition of **World Chronicle.**

ANNOUNCER: Transcripts of the program may be obtained free of charge by sending a stamped self addressed envelope to **World Chronicle**, United Nations, Room S -827, New York New York 10017.

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